

11 Why Circumcision?¹

Of the signs of the covenants, circumcision is the most troubling. It is no less uninterpreted than other rites, and to the Western mind it is no stranger than rites such as sacrifice (which itself seems more troubling in the light of developing “animal theology”).² A feeling that it has its amusing side may be an ancient as well as a modern one, and a feeling that can turn circumcision into black comedy (see Gen 34:25). But it is troubling because it is the most exclusive of covenant signs; most can apply to everyone, but circumcision (at least this particular rite of circumcision) applies only to males.

The point is made forcefully by Judith Plaskow in dialogue with Michael Wyschogrod. Over against the unbodily, flesh-denying, world-denying spirituality of Christian faith, Wyschogrod emphasizes the flesh-affirming, world-affirming bodiliness of Judaism. God’s election takes seriously the embodied, corporeal life of the Jewish people. God requires “the sanctification of human existence in all of its aspects.” And circumcision is the core symbol of this election, “a searing of the covenant into the flesh of Israel and not only, or perhaps not even primarily, into its spirit.”³

But this leaves Jewish womanhood in a systematically ambiguous position. Women represent Israel’s unredeemed flesh.⁴ Indeed, it has been suggested that the Priestly narrative in Genesis especially emphasizes circumcision precisely because it epitomizes male privilege in worship⁵ and/or because it safeguards patrilineal descent.⁶ Subsequently, circumcision “has symptomatized a deep gender dichotomy in the course of rabbinic Jewish history;” it was men who emphasized the rite of circumcision as the symbol of “a covenant presupposed as existing between men and God, a covenant... to which women are party only in a secondary way, through their relationship with fathers and then husbands.” “Circumcision was a rite of masculine status bestowal in which one man, the father, initiates a man-to-be, his son, into the covenant with God (conceived as a man).”⁷

There have been various attempts to take the edge off the significance of circumcision’s gender-exclusiveness. V. P. Hamilton suggests that because two people become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), only one of them needs the mark of the covenant.⁸ This is not convincing. Alice Laffey suggests that the First Testament’s emphasis on the importance of

¹ First published as “The Significance of Circumcision” in *JSOT* 88 (2000): 3-18.

² See chapter 21 below.

³ *The Body of Faith* (reprinted San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p. 67.

⁴ *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 82-84.

⁵ So R. B. Coote, “The Book of Joshua,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. L. E. Keck and others; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:553-719 (see p. 608).

⁶ See the general argument regarding priesthood and sacrifice in N. B. Jay, *Throughout Your Generations for Ever* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992).

⁷ L. A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1996), pp. 2, 26, 80.

⁸ *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 470.

metaphorical circumcision (of mind and lips) takes the edge off the confinement of the covenant sign to males; inner circumcision is open to both sexes.⁹ We will have cause to note that this advantage has a down side; metaphorical circumcision is introduced with a two-edged sword. Again, the horrific consequences of female circumcision might make us grateful that circumcision was confined to males; feminist critique would take a different form and would be much sharper if Israel had circumcised females. But this heightens rather than reduces the question why the sign of the covenant was one best confined to males.

The mystery of circumcision increases when one reviews the First Testament's major references to it, especially in connection with the great figures of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. In the account of its origin in Gen 17, God simply tells Abraham that circumcision is required, and the narrative relates its immediate application to Abraham's family and household (in 21:4 we are later assured that Isaac was also circumcised). It is clear that circumcision is to be an indispensable mark of being a (male) member of the people of promise (cf. Exod 12:44, 48; Lev 12:3). But it is not clear why. Indeed, it is not clear whether circumcision is a sign for God, or a sign for its recipients, or both, though I incline to the last view.

The circumcision story in Exod 4:24-26 is notoriously enigmatic; it has stimulated a wide variety of theories regarding its origin and meaning, but no consensus on the most basic questions.¹⁰ That the circumcision story in Josh 5:2-9 raises difficulties is reflected in the textual tradition itself, where for the first time in Joshua the Masoretic Text is significantly longer than the Old Greek text.¹¹ The latter suggests that some people left Egypt uncircumcised, implying that circumcision had not been properly administered there. MT reassures us that circumcision had been properly practiced in Egypt, but not during the wilderness journey, though it does not make clear why this was so, and it perhaps introduces a further unclarity regarding what the "shame" of Egypt consisted in. Nor is it clear in what sense people were being circumcised for a second time (so MT), and why. J. M. Sasson suggests that the second circumcision was a more radical version of the operation than the one applied in Egypt, cutting off skin rather than merely slitting it.¹² But during the First Testament period Israelite circumcision itself seems to have been of a not very radical kind. It was Jewish attempts to reverse it in the Greek period that led to the introduction of the version with which we are familiar, involving the exposure of the crown of the penis and not merely the cutting off of the foreskin.

Biblical scholarship has generally assumed that we need to dig beneath the surface of the text if we are to understand it, and the digging has produced an impressive variety of theories about the religious history of the rite, especially in connection with Exod 4. But the variety depresses as well as impresses. Apart from not producing any consensus, this form of digging does not seem destined to produce any usable results. Thus Athena

⁹ *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 62-64.

¹⁰ See now Athena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007).

¹¹ See conveniently R. D. Nelson, *Joshua* (Louisville: WJK/London: SCM, 1997), pp. 72-77.

¹² "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 473-76.

Gorospe focuses on studying Exod 4:24-26 in its narrative context in light of the work of Paul Ricoeur.¹³

Since the time of Sigmund Freud other writers have attempted psychological excavation of circumcision instead of religio-historical excavation, and my aim here is to try a version of that, informed by feminist questions and interests, of the kind that has produced creative results in connection with some other passages that may actually be related. Perhaps this may turn out to have the “power to make intelligible that which had been unintelligible.”¹⁴

This has worked elsewhere. J. C. Exum suggests that we move the focus of the stories of the patriarch passing off his wife as his sister to the question “Why should Israelites tell this story three times? What issue are they enabling to come to the surface?” Her answer is that they give expression to male ambiguity about their wives’ sexuality.¹⁵ Telling the story then gives men the opportunity to speak indirectly about an issue that is hard to discuss directly. But the cat is now out of the bag.

I. L. Rashkow offers a parallel reading of the stories of Noah and his son and Lot and his daughters.¹⁶ The reticence of the first story prevents our knowing whether it implies an actual sexual relationship between Noah and Ham, while the second story attributes the initiative in events to Lot’s daughters, but if we again ask “Why should Israelites tell such stories? What issues are they enabling to find expression?” then the answer that suggests itself, in parallel with the first example, is that they give expression to fathers’ ambiguity about the sexuality of their children. Telling these stories, too, gives men the opportunity to speak indirectly about an issue that is hard to discuss directly and that (we have become aware, over recent years) desperately needs discussing.

These strange stories about circumcision are open to an analogous reading. They witness to subconscious awareness of issues regarding male sexuality. This is not the whole truth about circumcision; its nature as a rite in itself perhaps precludes the idea of its having one meaning, for rites tend to be multivalent. But this reading opens up part of its meaning, the evidence being that it makes sense of some otherwise puzzling features of the biblical material. Looking at them in this way does not solve their religio-historical problems but it does suggest one answer to the question why Israel preserved these religio-historical mysteries, and it enables us to bring out into the open the issues to which they give indirect expression.

Way below the surface, requiring and accepting circumcision may be merciful alternatives to requiring and accepting castration,¹⁷ but the

¹³ See *Narrative and Identity*.

¹⁴ Jay’s claim for her feminist anthropological interpretation of sacrifice (*Throughout Your Generations Forever*, p. 97).

¹⁵ “Who’s Afraid of ‘The Endangered Ancestress’?” in Exum, *Fragmented Women* (JSOTSup 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 148-69.

¹⁶ “Daddy-dearest and the ‘Invisible Spirit of Wine,’” in *Genesis* (ed. A. Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible II/1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 82-107.

¹⁷ So S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Knopf, 1939), p. 192. For such theories which he calls “reductionist,” see Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, p. 28, and note 5; but see also I. N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis* (Louisville: WJK, 1993), esp. pp. 92-93.

stories themselves point to more concrete concerns with male sexuality. They point to the disciplining of procreation, of sexual activity itself, and of masculinity. It is then a nice fact that circumcision is not merely a covenant sign for Israel alone but the sign of a covenant with all Abraham's descendants (the descendants of Ishmael as well as Isaac, of Esau as well as Jacob, and of the foreigners who lived in their households). It is not only Israelite men who need this sign.

Having formulated this view of circumcision's significance, I was humbled to find much of it anticipated in Philo of Alexandria's typically systematic and instructive consideration of the matter. At the opening of his study of "The Specific Laws" (I.1-11 [I.i-ii]) he notes six reasons for the practice. The traditional rationales are that circumcision avoids infection, contributes to hygiene, symbolizes the disciplining of the whole person's creativity, and encourages fertility. Philo's additional suggestions are that it symbolizes sexual discipline in particular, and cuts back human pride in the capacity to procreate. It is further interesting to be told that "four interrelated themes are frequently embedded in African rites of circumcision: fertility, virility, maturity, and genealogy."¹⁸

On its first appearance in Gen 17, it seems plausible that circumcision signifies the disciplining of procreation. K. E. and J. M. Paige have apparently suggested that circumcision was a ritual that tested a man's trust in his wider community, as he lets his son be circumcised and thus lets this son's reproductive potential be both threatened (if the operation goes wrong) and realized (if it is effective).¹⁹ This precise rationale must lie somewhat behind Gen 17, for here Abraham does the circumcising on a son who is a baby, but the general suggestion of a link with procreation fits the context, and matches the extension of circumcision-thinking to fruit-trees (Lev 19:23-25). The covenant with Abraham here seals the promise of progeny; this promise dominates Gen 17 as it does not Gen 12 or 15.

Historically it seems that the circumcision of infants is a distinctive Israelite version of a rite practiced widely among Semitic peoples and elsewhere, but here it becomes a sign of God's covenant commitment to the individual and his acceptance of that commitment, even though he has no say in the matter.²⁰ M. G. Kline thus sees the act of cutting as symbolizing the cutting off that he wishes upon himself for failure to keep the covenant; it carries an implicit "God do thus to me, and more."²¹ The application of the sign to the organ of generation suggests specifically the cutting off of one's descendants, but also the consecration of one's descendants.²²

It would be a frightening oath. The covenant sign requires the cutting not of some random part of the body such as the hair, or the piercing of the nose, nor an operation such as the piercing of the ear which might

¹⁸ H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), p. 144.

¹⁹ So according to R. B. Coote and D. B. Ord, *In the Beginning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), pp. 68-70, referring to *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981). Eilberg-Schwartz (*The Savage in Judaism*, pp. 141-76) especially emphasizes the procreative significance of circumcision.

²⁰ Cf. N. M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 386.

²¹ See further chapter 9 above, §2.

²² *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 39-49 (pp. 86-89).

have had huge symbolic significance in terms of a commitment to listening to Yahweh. It requires the cutting of the part of the male body through which God's promise will be fulfilled. "God is demanding that Abram concede, symbolically, that fertility is not his own to exercise without divine let or hindrance. A physical reduction in the literal superabundance of Abram's penis is a sign with an intrinsic relationship to what it signifies.... The organ and the power behind it now belong partly to God."²³ It is striking that this assertion on God's part follows on Abram and Sarai's taking the initiative in the exercise of the power and the organ in Gen 16.

In a traditional society, the disciplining of procreation may thus relate in particular to male desire for male offspring who will both signify achievement and status (cf. Job 1.2; 42.13) and will also in real terms add to economic power. The disciplining of procreation puts such instincts under God's sovereignty, which could have the capacity to be a protection (for instance) both to a woman who could not have children and to one who all-too-easily could. In a modern society its significance might be the reverse. The original blessing of procreation designed to encourage it to fill the earth has been more than fulfilled, and the capacity to procreate needs disciplining. On the micro-level that is also true in the context of the breakdown of social structure in an urban society such as the one where I live (where the prevalence of the fatherless family has led to advertisements on buses to remind men that fatherhood is for ever).

According to the common view, "circumcision was originally and essentially a fertility device associated with puberty and marriage."²⁴ If circumcision were administered at puberty, then in particular it might suggest the disciplining of sexuality. Now after the birth of Isaac, the first mention of circumcision in the First Testament comes in the story of the hapless Shechemites in Gen 34. In the light of this aspect of the possible implicit significance of circumcision, the story carries some irony. Shechem has demonstrated that his sexuality is not circumcised, and it may seem quite appropriate for Jacob's sons to require his circumcising (along with that of the other men in his family) before he can marry their sister.²⁵ But that is not Jacob's sons' concern. For them, circumcision is merely the means to a wholly other end. It has become "a means of social control and exploitation."²⁶

Circumcision next features in the supremely enigmatic Exod 4:24-26. Yahweh has commissioned Moses to go back to Egypt and to begin confronting Pharaoh so that he will let Israel leave Egypt. On the way back there, "Yahweh met him and tried to kill him." A story about a threat to the life of Moses' and Zipporah's son would fit well in the context in general, but the specific preceding context suggests that "him" must be Moses, and the specific reference to their son that follows confirms this; but perhaps it makes little difference. Zipporah takes decisive action. She circumcises her son and touches Moses' legs (which might or might not be a euphemism for genitals) with her son's foreskin, and says "You really are a bloody

²³ J. Miles, *God: A Biography* (London/New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 53, 90.

²⁴ M. V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant," *RB* 81 (1974): 557-96 (see p. 591).

²⁵ Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 236

²⁶ W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), p. 278.

bridegroom for me.”²⁷ Then Yahweh let Moses alone. Only here is the bloodiness of circumcision noted and a link therefore hinted with bloodiness as a means of pollution and blood as a means of expiation. The LXX and the Targum thus assume that the blood has expiatory significance.²⁸ The smeared blood is graphic evidence that the child’s blood has been shed.²⁹ The preceding reference to Moses’ killing the Egyptian might hint at the reason why he needed a quasi-expiatory rite; blood-guilt attached to him.³⁰ That is then why he is an in-law characterized by bloodiness. His son’s blood has cleansed him from his bloodiness.³¹

If we read the Torah as we have it, clearly Moses is in breach of the crucial covenant requirement in Gen 17. If Zipporah’s action implies Moses is also uncircumcised, that is also odd. Moses himself, and perhaps his father, have neglected to administer the sign of covenant commitment. Moses is “in peril of the curse that was invoked against him in his own circumcision.”³² On a traditional critical view of the Pentateuch, we have had no instruction regarding circumcision in the pre-P narrative of Israel’s story up to Moses’ day. But the narrative would be quite capable of presupposing the practice nevertheless, and it may thus still imply that Moses’ or his son’s being uncircumcised is somewhat odd. On the other hand, in the case of the son it may assume some defensible explanation (see Josh 5:2-7, even if the logic there is obscure).³³ But in any case the narrative does not indicate that the uncircumcised state of Moses or his son is the reason for God’s attack. As is the case with God’s acceptance of Abel, and God’s attack on Jacob, and God’s later confrontation of Balaam, we may be

²⁷ A translation such as “a blood-circumcised one” (referring to the boy, not to Moses) would be easier in the context, and has been argued, e.g., by J. de Groot, “The Story of the Bloody Husband,” *OtSt* 2 (1943): 10-17 (see p. 13), H. Kosmala, “The ‘Bloody Husband,’” *VT* 12 (1962): 14-28 (see p. 27), and E. Kutsch in his article on *h/tn* in *Theological Dictionary to the Old Testament*, on the basis of the link between its root and an Arabic cognate meaning “circumcise.” But B. S. Childs (*Exodus* [London: SCM, 1974] = *The Book of Exodus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974], p. 98) makes the crucial point that in Arabic the verb refers not to circumcision in general but to the circumcising of a bridegroom. T. C. Mitchell (“The Meaning of the Noun *h/tn* in the Old Testament,” *VT* 19 [1969]: 93-112) concludes that the word means a relative by marriage, and B. P. Robinson (“Zipporah to the Rescue,” *VT* 36 [1986]: 447-61 [pp. 457-58]) argues that here it describes Moses as a son-in-law by virtue of blood, because circumcision was a father-in-law’s task.

²⁸ See G. Vermes, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957-58): 308-19 (see pp. 310-13); J. D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1993), pp. 50-52. For subsequent Judaism, see Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*.

²⁹ J. Morgenstern, “The ‘Bloody Husband’ (?) (Exod 4:24-26) Once Again,” *HUCA* 34 (1963): 35-70 (see p. 70); though he thinks it is the child whom Yahweh seeks to kill.

³⁰ So P. Middlekoop, “The Significance of the Story of the ‘Bloody Husband,’” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 8/4 (1966-67): 34-38 (see p. 35).

³¹ W. H. Propp (“That Bloody Bridegroom,” *VT* 43 [1993]: 495-518 [pp. 501-6]) provides a detailed but rather speculative account of precisely how this logic worked in the minds of the narrator and the audience.

³² Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, p. 88

³³ Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), p. 59.

able to infer reasons from hints in the context,³⁴ but that is all, and it suggests that the point of the story may lie somewhere else.³⁵

What issues regarding maleness might be expressed in this enigmatic story, or might have led to its preserving? In the modern world we are familiar with the assumption that a man's sexual instinct is for him a symbol of his manliness, his machismo. While Gen 16 marks Abraham as needing the circumcising of his manliness in the narrowly reproductive sense, it also provides some of the evidence that in general Abraham was something of a wimp (see, e.g., Gen 16:2, 6) and had less need of the circumcising of his manliness in this connection. Robinson suggests that Yahweh attacks Moses because of a continuing annoyance at his wimpishness (Exod 4:14a).³⁶ But the instructions and events that follow (Exod 4:14b-23) constitute the resolving of this matter. It is they, not Moses' resistance to being drafted, which provide the background to Yahweh's attack. Moses has already proved himself a more macho figure than Abraham (Exod 2.11-13, 17). Yahweh's instructions to Moses (Exod 4:19) have referred back to the exercise in machismo that got him into trouble and to the fact that the people who might have brought restraint to this instinct are now dead. So perhaps his vicarious circumcision has this symbolic significance. His attack by Yahweh demonstrates an irony in Yahweh's statement about the death of all the human beings who had sought his life. This does not solve all Moses' problems; Yahweh now seeks his death (the verb "sought" recurs). This happens at a moment resembling Yahweh's fight with Jacob, at night on a crucial journey. Jacob was a man who was literally circumcised but whose character was never subjected to Yahweh's constraint, even after the fight that Yahweh wins only by hitting below the belt. The symbolism and the parallelism will be the more powerful if Yahweh's attack was aimed at Jacob's genitals.³⁷ In Jacob's case, as in Moses', the timing means that Yahweh is not asserting authority over Jacob's capacity to procreate,³⁸ but he could well be asserting authority over his masculinity.³⁹

As Yahweh had once taken on the "old" Jacob, so now Yahweh takes on the "old" Moses, yet again in such a way as not to overwhelm him by divine firepower. "Yahweh tried to kill him:" what does that say about Moses' will-to-live, Moses' machismo? But the old Moses must die and a Moses under Yahweh's control be born. If he will not agree to that, his vicarious circumcision by Zipporah will symbolize it. "The blood of circumcision is a symbolic acknowledgment that a man's masculinity belongs to God."⁴⁰ Robinson suggests that after this encounter Moses becomes a decisive figure instead of someone who shirks God's call and

³⁴ See, e.g., Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," pp. 456-57.

³⁵ W. Brueggemann thus comments that the story witnesses to the deep, untamed holiness of God and to the risk involved in coming close to this God or being this God's servant ("The Book of Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 1:675-981 (see pp. 718, 720).

³⁶ "Zipporah to the Rescue," p. 456.

³⁷ So S. Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns," *HUCA* 46 (1975): 33-54 (see pp. 52-53).

³⁸ So S. H. Smith, "Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives", *VT* 40 (1990): 464-73 (see pp. 466-69).

³⁹ Cf. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), pp. 154-56.

⁴⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, p. 160.

incurs God's wrath, rather than that after this encounter Moses is prepared to submit his decisiveness to Yahweh.⁴¹ Perhaps it makes little difference why Moses' machismo needs to be circumcised: either he needs to be prepared to act the man for Yahweh's sake or he needs to be held back from acting the man for his own sake.

It is nice that it is a woman who has the opportunity to be involved in making the point. She is a sister to the women in Exod 1 – 2⁴² and to the mothers over far distant centuries who will have "brought their children, held them during the rite, had prayers said for their recovery from childbirth, and drunk some of the wine intended for their recuperation" until circumcision was turned into a male-only ritual.⁴³ If Moses' capacity to resist being killed by God suggests his strength, Zipporah's capacity to resist the loss of her husband and find the way to avoid this loss suggests hers. Perhaps it is in her interests to have her husband's masculinity subordinated to God.

The act of circumcision in Exod 4 is a rite of passage: Moses, Zipporah, and their son(s) are on the way from Midian to Egypt, as Jacob had been on the way back from Syria to Israel. The same is true of the act of circumcision in Josh 5. Indeed, the moments when Abraham, Moses, and Joshua's people are circumcised are all moments when God is in the midst of fulfilling a creative purpose – to give Abraham and Sarah children, to bring Israel out of Egypt, to give Israel its land. In each story the protagonists have taken some action – begetting a child by means of Hagar, killing an Egyptian, crossing the Jordan. In each story their key work and the fulfillment of God's promises in an impossible event is imminent – the begetting of Isaac, the victory over the Pharaoh, the conquest of Jericho. In each story the cutting back of the flesh with its potency might imply the subordinating of human strength to the divine plan. In connection with Josh 5, T. C. Butler comments that "only a circumcised Israel could become a conquering Israel."⁴⁴ More immediately, only a circumcised Israel could celebrate Passover. Exodus 4 perhaps links implicitly with Exod 12:48, and neither Moses nor his son can be imagined taking part in that first Passover if uncircumcised, but the two rites are actually juxtaposed in Josh 5.

Beyond these stories about physical circumcision in the Hexateuch, the Torah and the Prophets also make a number of references to metaphorical circumcision. Although the rite of circumcision itself, like many other rites, is not explicitly interpreted, like other rites it seems likely always to have been a practice with a significance. It was a symbol and not merely a sign.⁴⁵ G. von Rad comments that circumcision must surely have been implicitly an act of bodily purification and dedication, otherwise it could hardly have become a metaphor for inner circumcision.⁴⁶ Within Gen 17, G.

⁴¹ "Zipporah to the Rescue," p. 452. In contrast, Middlekoop ("The Significance of the Story of the 'Bloody Husband,'" p. 37) notes the contrast between the Moses of Exod 2 and the supremely "meek" Moses of Num 12:3.

⁴² Cf. C. Houtman, "Exodus 4:24-26", *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 11 (1983): 81-103 (see p. 102).

⁴³ Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, p. 207.

⁴⁴ *Joshua* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 56.

⁴⁵ Cf. the discussion in H.-J. Hermisson, *Sprache und Ritus im altisraelitischen Kult* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1965), pp. 64-76.

⁴⁶ *Genesis* (2nd ed., London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 196.

J. Wenham suggests a link with the call to live whole before God (Gen 17:2).⁴⁷ Sarna goes further and insists that it inherently “betokened dedication and commitment to God.”⁴⁸

If this is right, then passages referring to metaphorical circumcision do not spiritualize what was earlier a “merely” external rite, though they may extend the rite’s inherent symbolic significance. Indeed, the talk of metaphorical circumcision is probably as old as the talk of literal circumcision. While the rite of circumcision apparently goes back to the time of Israel’s ancestors, it does not become a sign of the covenant until the time of the Priestly writing. This at least belongs to the same period as the passages about metaphorical circumcision and may be later than most of them. There is no development whereby the physical comes to be taken for granted and emphasis is removed to the spiritual.

Moses sees himself as someone of uncircumcised lips (Exod 6:12, 30), one who has not been trained to speak; it would not be surprising if the man who is hasty to action is also inclined to speak before his brain is engaged. God fears that the people as a whole will turn out to be uncircumcised in mind (Lev 26:41); they will not have the mental and spiritual discipline to live in accordance with God’s teaching. Moses himself urges them to circumcise themselves mentally and spiritually and not be resistant to God’s teaching (Deut 10:16), and also promises that God will do that for them (Deut 30:6). Jeremiah issues the same exhortation to people and warns of the trouble to come to peoples who are merely physically circumcised - including Israel (Jer 4:4; 9:25). They need their ears circumcised (Jer 6:10). With some irony, then, Ezekiel has Yahweh insisting that foreigners must be circumcised both spiritually and physically if they are to enter Yahweh’s sanctuary (Ezek 44:7, 9). Thus, Paul argues, a Jew who is circumcised externally but not inwardly ceases to be a real Jew (Rom 2:25-29).

A sign applied only to males thus provides a metaphor for the need to be trained and disciplined if one is to speak well and to live well. What might this imply?

Let us put alongside it an interesting feature of the New Testament story. To the chagrin of a feminist, Jesus appoints only men as members of the group of twelve whom he gathers round him as the nucleus of a renewed Israel. But to the relief of the feminist, there turns out to be method or at least irony in his omission. The twelve male representatives of Israel misunderstand Jesus, betray him, and abandon him. At the moment when he sets about his most decisive act in achieving that renewal of Israel, he is accompanied only by a large crowd of women (Mark 15:40-41). It is some of them who are also the first people to discover that the tomb is empty and who are commissioned to tell the men that Jesus has been raised to a transformed life and has gone off to Galilee, where they will also see him in due course (Mark 16:1-7). The events that follow Jesus’ appointment of the twelve men thus explode any suggestion that there is something distinctive about men that provides a positive qualification for their being the exclusive leaders of the renewed Israelite community.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Genesis*, p. 387.

A similar implication emerges from the First Testament references to physical and metaphorical circumcision. It starts off looking like a sign establishing that full membership of the Israelite community belongs especially to males. I say "it starts off" as such, referring to the order within the text itself; historically, this seems to have been a Priestly innovation. In origin, full membership of Israel did not depend on accepting a sign that by its nature could apply only to males. But it becomes (again, following the order of the text) a sign of a disciplined-ness that the Israelite community actually lacks. The very fact that it is the males who bear this sign means that it is the males who embody spiritual and mental unfitness to belong to the people of promise.

It is further suggestive that this sign is one the male bears in his sexual organ. Abraham was supposed to see the fulfillment of God's promise through his sexual activity, but before this happens his sexual activity is the means whereby he seeks to engineer his own fulfillment of God's promise. His antitype, David, notoriously fails Yahweh in his sexual activity (2 Sam 11), being a true descendant of Judah (Gen 38). David's own son, Solomon, the great temple-builder, does the same in his own way (1 Kings 11). Proverbs suggests that the distinctively male sin is sexual failure (e.g., Prov 5:16-23). Job begins his claim to having lived a wholly committed life by declaring that he has not "looked on a virgin" (Job 31:1).

Moses is the exception who proves the rule. There are no skeletons in his sexual cupboard (none that Exodus-Deuteronomy exposes!), except whatever is the one implied by Exod 4. But that failure would suggest he had not taken seriously the significance of the sign of circumcision. It draws attention to the fact that men in particular lack the moral and spiritual commitment and discipline that make holiness possible (no more than women, no doubt, though they have sometimes implied that women are the origin of sin), and that their sexuality is a focus of this lack. It is a potentially fatal failure on Moses' part, and God confronts him with it a potentially fatal way. For this reason, turning circumcision into a metaphor for discipline of mind and speech may have the advantage of letting the sign apply metaphorically to women, but it has the disadvantage of robbing circumcision of its cutting edge with regard to men. In letting women in, it lets men off. Indeed, perhaps Christian abandonment of circumcision was a mistake. The Christian church needs its symbolism.

If God gives men this sign of a covenant commitment despite - even because of - their lack of that commitment and discipline and on the basis of the focus of this lack, there is indeed hope for them and for the world. But they can no more make their receiving this sign a basis for claims to authority that exclude women than they can make such claims on the basis of Jesus' twelve comprising only men.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., E. Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (London: SCM, 1982/New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 109-13; *A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey* (London: SCM/New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 82-83.